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Marriage in the Short Stories of Chekhov

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Abstract: In his article "Marriage in the Short Stories of Chekhov" Mark Richard Purves explores Anton Chekhov's often occurring depiction of marriage. Purves posits that Chekhov's depiction of the experience of marriage raises important ontological questions about the core features of family life such as what it means to be a husband, what it means to be a wife, and the degree of relatedness between them. Chekhov elaborates on what he sees as matrimony's central antinomy, namely that the wedding of one individual to another produces loneliness, an absence of intimacy, and a kind of alienation so acute it causes love itself to cool in a relationship pulled apart by the asymmetries of social status and personal likes and dislikes.

Mark Richard PURVES

Marriage in the Short Stories of Chekhov

Given his regard for Anton Chekhov's work, W.H. Auden may have had the Russian author in mind when he said, "Any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any romance, however passionate" (62). Considering the hold the theme of marriage exercised over Chekhov throughout his career, it is likely he would have shared his admirer's sentiments. The experience of marriage constitutes a major preoccupation in Chekhov's oeuvre and yet since the earliest reviews of his work scholars and critics assumed that when it came to marriage, Chekhov only and always took the dimmest view: "It's an old Chekhovian theme ... marriage is prison and chains" (Tikhomirov 244). This is a claim careful readers will find both sensible and suspect. It has been argued that "close and lasting love between a husband and a wife is nowhere represented in Chekhov" (McLean <<http://sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/10/mclean10.shtml>>) and that it was Chekhov's intention to "cast a shadow over that stalwart family value, the institution of holy matrimony" (Senelick 564). To cast a shadow over an institution is not to call for its overhaul: I submit that while conflicts in Chekhov's texts often originate in marriage, the tradition itself was a peripheral concern for Chekhov who was an apolitical author as he stated himself (Chekhov, "Letter 68" 155).

Chekhov's grim depiction of marriage boasts a darker provenance: "misogyny" (Smith 35), a provocative claim to be sure, yet one embraced by a number of contemporary scholars such as Mikhail Zolotonosov, who regards Chekhov's narration of women as a helpful frame for understanding a body of work characterized by a "pervasive anti-marital ideology" (99). Zolotonosov, a sexologist, attributes Chekhov's misgivings about marriage to an abnormal fear of women (gynophobia). This anxiety, which surely derives from the author's well-known struggle with "anal aggression" (Zolotonosov 9) is compounded — as Zolotonosov argues albeit without a shred of clinical or historical evidence — by a diminished level of oxytocin that is said to have depleted Chekhov's libido. The gynophobia Chekhov suffered by is complicated by his decision to wed Olga Knipper in 1901, whom Chekhov, Zolotonosov would have us believe, "found physically repulsive" (106; on Chekhov's marriage see also Paperny; Rayfield). To reduce the whole of Chekhov's thinking about marriage into one portmanteau notion is to disregard the complex contradictions which inhere in his portraits of married life, chief among them Chekhov's tendency to scrutinize the practice of marriage while still seeing the overwhelming majority of his characters married off.

Determined to make a full identification of Chekhov's disdain for marriage with the unhappy spouses in his fiction, conventional scholarship unvaryingly points to "The Lady with the Little Dog." The story concerns an adulterous couple whose experience of shared intimacy is so deep it can only be described in marital terms: "they loved each other like tender friends, like husband and wife" (143; all subsequent short story quotations are from Chekhov, *Tales of Anton Chekhov*). Scholars of the story emphasized the uniqueness of the relationship as "in Chekhov the best example of a marriage is in actuality an adulterous affair" (Heldt 22), a prevailing view to be sure, yet one receding in favor of a more sophisticated understanding of the story as a reflection of the author's evolving thoughts on marriage as "an exclusive emotional and physical commitment in love" (Miles 99).

As to the roughly twenty years in which Chekhov oscillated over marriage, a period during which he has been described as by turns tender and callous with the "women seeking to claim him" (Sukhikh 235), current scholarship makes use of Chekhov's private diaries, from which the following statements are extracted: "Marriage? I'd rather hang myself" (37), "I've noticed that those who marry cease to be curious" (70), "They fell in love, got married, and were unhappy" (83), "A man and a woman got married because they had nothing else to do" (87), and "if you're afraid of loneliness, don't marry" (121). As to the question of why Chekhov chose to marry late in life, the truth is no doubt less interesting: that the author associated marriage with the loss of private and artistic freedom cannot be denied, but the vehemence Chekhov reposed occasionally toward marriage was more likely a personal rather than a political, pathological, or psychosexual matter, a reflection of his hardscrabble experiences caring for the several, often unemployed, members of his family.

No other topic in Chekhov's work is singled out for greater opprobrium than marriage. As indicated above, contemporary scholarship offers several illuminating approaches to Chekhov's thoughts on the

conditions and consequences of married life. Yet when it comes to explaining and exploring the specific conflicts arising out of the marriages depicted in Chekhov's work, the critical consensus is unaware of the nuanced modifications through which Chekhov cogitates the complex nature of marital relations. To grasp the significance of these modifications, I trace Chekhov's depictions of marriage in his earliest fiction up to the period during which he begins to refine his portraits of married life, through a close reading of the following stories: "Mari d'elle" (1885), "The Husband" (1886) "The Pharmacist's Wife" (1886), and "The Wife" (1891). As the titles of these works indicate, the estrangement of spouses represents a predominant concept in Chekhov's work and provoke ontological questions about one's place within a marriage, the matrimonial duties a spouse feels responsible to bear, and the bitterness this spouse feels in bearing them. Chekhov elaborates on what he sees as matrimony's central antinomy, namely that the wedding of one individual to another produces loneliness, an absence of intimacy, and a kind of alienation so acute it causes love itself to cool in a relationship pulled apart by the asymmetries of social status and personal likes and dislikes.

Chekhov's early work makes clear that his interest in marriage occurs from the outset. Sketches of married life during this period bear the following titles: "The Wedding Season" (1881), "How I Became Legally Wed" (1883), "The Dowry" (1883), "Wedding with a General" (1884), "Marriage for Money" (1884), "Instructions for Those Wishing to Marry" (1885), "On the Wedding Season" (1885), "Marriage in 10-15 Years" (1885), "The Suitor and the Daddy" (1885), "I Quarreled with My Wife" (1884), "For the Consideration of Husbands: Instructions for Those Wishing to Marry" (1885), and "My Wives" (1885). With near uniformity, these texts center on a variety of obstacles potential brides and grooms must overcome in order to become engaged. For the men obstacles range from pushy father figures, to fellow rivals, and pesky creditors looking to stop the marriage from taking place. For women the most common obstacle preventing marriage is the absence of an acceptable suitor. Most often, the only hope a couple has in surmounting these hurdles comes in the form of money. Chekhov's interest in structuring these works around questions of commerce finds expression in "Before the Wedding" (1880) and "The American Way" (1880), stories Chekhov wrote at the beginning of a career that would see the publication of over five hundred works of prose and in which the recurring image of money reduces marriage to a loveless transaction.

"Before the Wedding" concerns a mother and father who conceal their antipathy for each other until the very moment their daughter's marriage contract is signed. Once this is completed, the parents take the daughter aside to reveal what she can expect from married life. Her mother tells her not to trust her husband completely nor to ever believe anything her father says. The father confides to her that the girl's mother is a renowned liar, that she should suspect her new husband of every kind of indiscretion, and that even after she says her wedding vows, her father — not her husband — will remain the most important figure in her life. Following these visits, the future wife shares a conversation with her future husband who reveals to her that instead of the fifteen hundred ruble dowry promised by her parents, the girl's mother has now decided to bestow a thousand only. "The American Way" takes the form of a personal ad in which its author announces his intentions to marry. The bachelor lists a number of requirements for his future bride to meet among them the ability to sing, dance, read, write, boil, deep-fry, and bake. Outlining the desired physical characteristics of his bride-to-be, "neither thin nor fat" (52), the bachelor is reluctant to divulge the reason he wishes to marry except to impart the unwittingly telling: "I want to get married for reasons known only to me and my creditors" (51). What emerges from this public advertisement reveals the unsavory fact that more than companionship, its author searches for someone to save him from financial ruin. Inflexible in his stipulations, which dictate that his wife keeps in the latest styles bought with her own money, the bachelor requires a dowry of at least two hundred thousand rubles — a figure he is willing to reconsider "if my creditors agree to it" (52).

Chekhov's use of exaggeration suggests his fondness for stock situations and conventional characters found in vaudeville, a genre Chekhov both loved and practiced (see Gottlieb 17). As a result, Chekhov's efforts to melodramatize the experience of marriage in all its crass and crude permutations fail to capture the attention of a reader more interested in a world made up of ribald jokes, of ham-handed pratfalls, of cuckolded husbands, and domineering wives fobbing off their daughters on shady suitors. Yet as Chekhov matured, so did his treatment of identity within the context of marriage, fleshing out the psychological possibilities which had largely lain dormant in his earlier sketches of married

life. "Mari d'elle," "The Pharmacist's Wife," and "The Husband" appear to be constructed according to a specific principle — that the presence of a spouse as a stranger provides the story's motivation. The opening paragraph of "Mari d'elle" demonstrates this, concretizing the emotional gap husband and wife experience by setting the couple on opposite sides of a room: "It was a free night. The opera singer Natalia Andreevna Bronina (her married name was Nikitin) is lying in her bedroom, her whole being lost in tranquility. She sweetly lies, thinking of her little daughter who lives somewhere far away with either her grandmother or aunt ... The child is dearer to her than the public, the bouquets, the reviews in the papers, her fans...and she is glad to think about her till morning. She is happy, at peace, and desires only for one thing: not to be kept from lying undisturbed, to doze and dream only of her little girl" (99).

In a work where the events are tied to the point of view of its protagonist, it is curious that the narrative should introduce the wife by her maiden name, not the name she shares with her husband. The image of the solitary wife whose thoughts travel beyond the walls of her home serves to further underscore the distance separating the spouses of this text. Appropriately on cue, her husband arrives noisily announcing, "Damn it all, nowhere to hang my coat" (99). Fumbling for a place to put his things, the husband all but announces his own misplacement within his wife's home. Rousing herself from the dream she was happily indulging, she realizes the identity of her guest: "My husband," she thinks. Significantly, during the space of their entire interchange she never calls her husband by name and refers to him only as "husband" (99, 100, 102). In fact, without the narrator's intervening "entered her husband, *mari d'elle*, Denis Petrovich Nikitin" (99), the reader would never discover the title character's name. The impersonal nomenclature by which the wife names her spouse influences the language the narrator chooses when describing the unwanted husband, referring to him repeatedly as "*mari d'elle*" (99-105), literally "her husband." The source of the couple's discontentment stems from what the wife sees as her husband's perpetual impecuniosity, his wasteful spending of the income she provides as a popular entertainer. The wife's profession is one the husband opposed initially going as far as evicting his wife from their home after her decision to pursue her profession. In time as her popularity increased so did her paychecks and the husband moved in to assume his duties as head of the household. Now the husband of a celebrity (the wife is a singer), he becomes a "groupie" whose lowly status he recognizes when communicating with his wife, whom he calls "Nathalie" instead of her preferred "Natasha" (101).

"The Pharmacist's Wife" tells the story of a lonely wife keeping watch over her husband's pharmacy and the much-wanted attention she receives from a passing officer and an army physician stationed near the shop. In "The Husband," the peevish eponym watches his wife share a passionate dance with an officer, only to drag her home to the rousing sounds played by the evening's orchestra. The imagery of these works re-accentuates the emotional gulf isolating the spouses of "Mari d'elle," where husband and wife are for each other mere notional presences. For example, compare the opening paragraphs of "The Pharmacist's Wife" with those of "The Husband":

The little town of B., consisting of two or three crooked streets, was sound asleep. There was a complete stillness in the motionless air. Nothing could be heard but far beyond the town's borders a dog barking in a thin, gruff tenor. The sun was soon to rise. Everything had long been asleep. The only person not asleep was the young wife of Chernomordik, a qualified distributor who ran the town's pharmacy. She had gone to bed and got up again three times, but could not sleep, and she did not know why. She sat at the open window in her nightdress and looked into the street. She felt bored, depressed, displeased...so displeased that she felt quite inclined to cry — again she did not know why. There seemed to be a lump in her chest that kept rising into her throat ... A few paces behind her Chernomordik lay curled up close to the wall, snoring sweetly. A greedy flea was stabbing the bridge of his nose, but he did not feel it, and was confidently smiling over his dream in which everyone in the town had a cough, and was buying from him the King of Denmark's cough-drops. He could not have been wakened now by pricks or by cannon or by caresses. (192)

"The Husband" begins with the following:

In the course of maneuvers the N. cavalry regiment halted for a night at the district town of K. Such an event as the visit of officers always has the most exciting and inspiring effect on the inhabitants of provincial towns ... The ladies of K., hearing the regiment approaching, forsook their pans of boiling jam and ran into the street. Forgetting their morning *deshabille* and general untidiness, they rushed breathless with excitement to meet the regiment, and listened greedily to the band playing the march. Looking at their pale, ecstatic faces, one might have thought those strains came from some heavenly choir rather than from a military brass band ... At nine o'clock in the evening the

military band was playing in the street before the club, while in the club itself the officers were dancing with the ladies of K. The ladies felt as though they were on wings. Intoxicated by the dancing, the music, and the clank of spurs, they threw themselves heart and soul into making the acquaintance of their new partners, and quite forgot their old civilian friends. Their fathers and husbands, forced temporarily into the background, crowded round the meager refreshment table in the entrance hall. (242-43)

In the openings of both short stories Chekhov establishes a setting of contrasting images to foreground the detachment spouses experience in marriage. Note, for instance, the wide-eyed restlessness of the disconsolate pharmacist's wife in contrast to her husband, "snoring sweetly" to his dreams of petty success. First among the ladies rushing to meet their town's newest batch of male arrivals is Anna Pavlovna, the wife in the "The Husband." Her visage joins the "ecstatic faces" belonging to those seeking a momentary reprieve from the trammels of married life; her husband bands together with the other forgotten spouses "into the background" (243). Chekhov employs contrast to shed light on the disjunction between the husbands and wives of these pieces by drawing subtle comparisons between the female characters and the loneliness they suffer in marriage. For instance, when Pavlovna joins the adoring throng of fellow wives rushing to meet their temporary suitors, she listens greedily to the music coming from the band. This recalls the greedy flea in "The Pharmacist's Wife" whose stinging attacks fail to rouse the sleeping pharmacist in the same way his wife cannot wake him. Instead of marking these women out for avarice, their "greed" is more an avidity for the prospect of something other than the marriages they endure.

In "The Pharmacist's Wife," Chekhov expands the sense of anonymity associated with marriage. First, he places the pharmacy on the edge of town, "so that the Pharmacist's wife is rarely seen in public" (192). Second, despite learning the names of the officer and the slumbering pharmacist, for the reader the title hero remains simply the wife of the pharmacist, whose name is subsumed to a category of her husband's profession. The impersonal title she bears gives way to other epithets by which the officer and physician objectify her, pronouncing her a fairy (194), a fruit (194), and a pineapple (194). When they discuss the shortcomings of the pharmacist, they note his inability to differentiate between his beautiful wife and a bottle of carbolic acid (193). The sexual overtones marking the conversation taking place between the pharmacist's wife and the officer Obtesov entice the woman to dream of a rendezvous the impossibility of which she gradually discovers. From behind a thin window of glass, the pharmacist's wife watches the officer depart with his companion only to see the object of her desires return in hopes of stealing the woman away. Unfortunately, the dream promising the tryst ceases the moment Obtesov rings the bell, waking the sleeping husband who reprimands his wife for her inattention. Accentuating her loneliness, the position she assumes behind the window emblemizes the role she plays within her husband's home. From the window barring her way to the man who clearly desires her, the unnamed wife turns toward a man who does not: settling with ease back to sleep, the pharmacist does not hear his wife's plaintive "Oh, how unhappy I am ... and nobody, nobody knows" (197). Back in bed, they assume the very positions marking the work's opening tableaux, where a wakeful wife like the buzzing flea who fails to stir the snoring spouse sits beside an unfeeling husband, asleep to her misery.

In contrast to the eager wives of "The Husband" who scrape and clamor before the newly arrived officers at the local ball, the husbands occupy the frame's outer edges. Aware of their wretchedness, the husbands do not even enter the dance hall, but content themselves to watch their beaming wives gallivant in the arms of officers. Watching his wife in the presence of a dashing, black-haired Tatar, the husband, a tax collector named Shalikov, sneers, "Here she is nearly forty with nothing to show for and she's flirting, making sweet faces, and imagining she's pulling it off" (244). For Pavlovna, the dance she shares with the unnamed officer removes her from the wretched marriage she shares with Shalikov, for "one could see as she danced that her thoughts were with the past, that distant past when she used to dance at the 'College for Young Ladies,' dreaming of a life of luxury and joy, and never doubting that her husband was to be a prince, or, at the worst, a baron" (243). When we read that prior his betrothal Shalikov "attended university, read Pisarev and Dobroliubov, and sang," but now viewed himself as a tax collector and nothing more (243), Chekhov makes plain the paradox that for this couple the source of misery souring their marriage turns out to be marriage itself. As Shalikov grabs Pavlovna's arm, she recoils in alarm: "Seeing her husband standing before her, Anna Pavlovna started as though remembering she had a husband; then she flushed all over: she felt ashamed that

she had such a wan, peevish, ordinary husband" (245). As a reminder of all she has lost through marriage to Shalikov, her husband thrusts her back to a reality where Pavlovna, for a moment made radiant by dancing, now appears "thinner, older, duller" (245). When she protests and wonders aloud why her husband demands she leave with him, he responds, "I don't want you, but I wish you to be at home. I wish it, that's all" (245). Unable to rebel against the wedding vows spoken years ago, Shalikov vents his fury upon his wife, threatens to make a scene, and revels in the petty pleasure of his self-lacerating victory. Stepping away from the frenzied mind of Shalikov, the narrative concludes with Pavlovna "trying to think of the most offensive, cutting, and virulent word she could hurl at her husband, and at the same time she was fully aware that no word could penetrate her tax-collector's hide" (246). Like the anonymous lead of "The Pharmacist's Wife," Pavlovna's story concludes with the image of a disappointed wife chained to a husband numb to her needs.

The links between "The Pharmacist's Wife," "The Husband," and "The Wife" are mostly thematic. The absence of intimacy, as well as the loneliness and anonymity we have come to expect in Chekhov's marriage portraits are all there, summoned in a disturbing portrayal of a husband whose warped sense of matrimonial duty leaves him not only impervious to the needs of his spouse, but central to her sorrow. The events building "The Wife" are handled altogether differently however, mediated from the flawed perspective of a man through whom Chekhov approaches the question as to whether and to what extent relational symmetry between spouses is possible. The plot is uncomplicated and straightforward: a husband tries to adopt the interests of his wife from whom he has long been estranged. When she resists, suspecting her normally unconcerned husband of ulterior motives, the man takes offence and promises to leave forever. However, when he discovers from acquaintances that his wife is an esteemed person in society, the husband changes his mind and returns home, assuring his crushed wife that he is a "changed man" (58). Set against the famines that ravaged parts of central and southern Russia in the early 1890s, "The Wife" complicates the ethos of anonymity that transforms spouses into strangers to each other.

The explicit relational asymmetry the couple experiences is made implicit by the story's title: "The Wife" appears to indicate that its focus is a married woman when in fact it is her husband, Asorin, who constitutes the story's principle subject. The sense of alienation characterizing their marriage is developed further by Chekhov's decision to render the details of his story from the first-person perspective of the husband, the effect of which causes the reader to understand the wife of "The Wife" at a telling remove. The unreliability Asorin shows as a narrator is thus linked with the undependability he shows as a husband. For instance, "The Wife" opens with a letter addressed to the husband in which a district nurse posing as a well-wisher implores the wealthy landowner for money to support the impoverished residents of a nearby village. Asorin's letter serves to establish the conflict to follow between husband and wife: Natalia Gavrilovna spent months lending assistance to relief efforts, unlike her husband who, out of "disappointment" (22), works on a book dealing with the history of railroads. Further, the letter underscores Asorin's self-absorption and serves as a kind of preface to the difficulties he later describes between an "unstable and unserious" (22) wife. By inserting a letter that appeals to its addressee's humanity, Asorin foregrounds his altruism in an attempt to cultivate the reader's sympathy for him. As the title of his notes indicates, the intended subject of his pen is his spouse, a fact reflected in the title of the text that serves as a kind of conceit emphasizing the actual source of his marital misery: his wife. Blind to the role he plays in ruining the tranquility husband and wife seem only to enjoy when apart, Asorin cannot conceive of his wife's happiness outside the marriage he seeks to salvage.

Another aspect that problematizes the relationship between the married protagonists of "The Wife" stems from the husband's ambivalence toward his spouse. While assessing the stasis their marriage has reached as "two people who have drifted so far apart so as to live under one roof without the slightest appearance of closeness" (23), Asorin's words often find themselves at variance with his thoughts regarding his wife. Away from him, she is "cold, empty and dull" (23), yet he struggles to let his passion for Natalia wither away, so he avoids making eye contact "lest my glance somehow betray my secret feelings" (24). Asorin's inability to articulate these feelings in an open and honest way causes him — to say nothing of his wife — confusion which he likens to "a sensation exactly like what I had once felt in a storm on the North Sea, when everyone thought that our steamer would capsize because she carried no weight or ballast" (31). The image Asorin evokes of the tipping ship represents

just one instance in which the husband attempts to portray himself the victim of forces for which he does not feel responsible. In his telling, the narrator fails to grasp the deeper reaches of his metaphor and in turn forfeits the sympathy he seeks to secure from the reader. The absence of weight failing to stabilize the overturning vessel represents the dearth of Asorin's thinking and his refusal to acknowledge the hand he has played in sinking his marriage.

In what follows, Asorin draws upon all the indexical signs we have come to expect in Chekhov's accounts of alienated husbands and wives, albeit in transmuted form. Like the husband of "Mari d'elle," Asorin calls his wife not by her Russian name, Natalia, but Natalie, a pretense to culture emphasizing what Nabokov called the "sham world" (182) that characterized the life of the Russian bourgeoisie presumably to make her name more "cultured" (i.e., French instead of Russian). Further underscoring the foreignness marking their marriage, Asorin makes repeated reference to his wife's place of birth, Odessa, as the cause of her "bad taste" (26). When husband and wife meet, their conversations consist of empty pleasantries exchanged by unfamiliar servants laboring in the same home, talking about "the weather" or how "it was about time to fit the double window frames for winter and that someone had driven over the dam with carriage bells ringing" (25). So go the conversations usually taking place between the husbands and wives in Chekhov's texts, a mode of interlocution known as phatic speech, which according to one recent study, is "a major linguistic feature found in Chekhov's prose" (Stepanov 97). When an interchange occurs to reveal their feelings for each other, it does so through indirection, as in Natalia's unflattering description of her husband before a guest: "I want to put it in general terms," she begins placing an emphasis on the impersonally broad nature of their union, "there are some people utterly heartless and devoid of feeling, yet they can't leave others alone in their misery, but interfere because they're afraid of those others being able to get on without them. Nothing is sacred to them, they're so self-important" (29). Asorin responds with equal indirection, substituting the "you" of his counterattack with the unspecific "some people ... who have characters like angels, articulate their sublime ideas in such a way that the angel becomes difficult to distinguish from a monger hawking her goods at an Odessa flea market" (29).

Images of estranged spouses occupying the crammed corners of a single flat revealed a key antinomy Chekhov espied in the irreconcilable nature of marriage. In "The Wife," Chekhov dramatizes the insurmountable emotional distance separating husband and wife and the asymmetrical nature of their marriage by placing them on different floors within the same house. After acquainting his audience with the details of his long-dead nuclear family, Asorin tells the tale of his "second family" (23), a group comprising a single member, his wife, who has spent the last two years living on the floor below him. For Asorin, the subordinated nature of Natalia's place beneath his feet reinforces the husband's sense of marital supremacy reflected in the following statement: "My wife is a proud woman with a sense of her own importance. She and her relatives live at my expense, and she can't manage without my money, much as she would like to, which gives me satisfaction and has been at times the sole comfort in my misery" (24). Given the delight he feels in his wife's debasement, it would not be fanciful to correlate the lowly position Natalia occupies at home with the even lower regard Asorin has for his spouse. Yet this is a temptation Chekhov clearly avoids: for all his marital manipulation Asorin longs for the company of his wife.

The spatial dimensions of Asorin's home dividing husband and wife symbolize the asymmetrical nature of their relations. For Natalia, the space provided through this arrangement allows her to live a life of relative autonomy giving her the opportunity to pursue her social interests outside the shadow of her husband. Irked that their domestic agreement brings his wife any satisfaction, Asorin demands to take part in her life ingratiating himself with her company, interrupting their plans, reminding them that "this wife, these comfy rooms, this fireplace — these things are mine" (28). Unwittingly living up to his wife's damning caricature as one who refuses to let others wallow in misery alone out of fear that those very people just may be "able to get on without them" (29), Asorin betrays the antipathy he professes for his wife in his efforts to keep her as close as possible. In order to recapture the intimacy long since lost in their relationship, Asorin gives careful ear to the sounds coming "through the floor" (34). In addition to illustrating his impotency in restoring the familiarity for which he desperately longs, Asorin's eavesdropping reveals the narrator's insecurity. For instance, as he thinks of an excuse in order to visit his wife, Asorin is drawn downstairs by the "sound of weeping" he hears coming from

below. Drawing closer to her rooms, Asorin hears the voice of an indistinct someone chide him for his vanity and selfishness — attributes he denies, but of which he is guilty.

Subsequent meetings between husband and wife provide similar moments of self-reflection for the narrator, who admits the falsity of the marriage, the "conjugal hatred" of two people who chased each other "into a church, and had started fighting in front of the altar" (42). It is in no way unreasonable to expect that in failing something is learned, some lesson is gained for the future. And yet, instead of fortifying Asorin's resolve in honoring his promise to grant his wife a divorce, these realizations motivate him in finding a solution to their marital problems. Unfortunately for both, neither can say what this solution entails and after his arrival and much mental preparation Asorin stands before his wife — whose hopes of freedom his homecoming are dashed — with nothing to offer except his same old self: "I haven't left home, Natalie," he begins, once again addressing her in a tone of detachment, "but this isn't a trick, I'm a changed man — make of it what you like. I have reacted to my former self with terror — yes, with terror, I tell you! I loathe it, I'm ashamed of it, and my new self, born yesterday, won't let me leave" (58). The presence Asorin promises to maintain in his wife's life suggests the absence of intimacy they experience in marriage: engaging his wife creates the presence of an inexplicable burden, a relation of asymmetry that resembles equality. In response to her husband's "rebirth" Natalia rushes to her room in tears. Asorin, the self-proclaimed "new" man, responds by resuming his old room above his wife's. By returning the married couple of "The Wife" to their former spaces opposite each other, Chekhov restores the paradox pervading his texts where marriage instead of fostering togetherness results in alienation.

To what do these failed marriages amount? Perhaps they illustrate Chekhov's thinking about the possibility of mutual respect and abiding affection within marriage, albeit explored negatively. Julian Connolly notes that "although it is true that Chekhov peoples his works with characters living lives of delusion, frustration, and futility, his treatment of these lives implies that a better way of living is both possible and preferable" (111). It is also possible that the marital conflicts Chekhov traces have less to do with marriage per se and more with the ineradicable nature of conflict itself. If intractable difficulty is a natural part of the human experience, as Chekhov believed, it follows that even a good marriage is not free from struggle. To acknowledge that conflict between spouses cannot be overcome, but managed more or less resolutely and to abandon the fiction of marital bliss in the direction of something like wisdom. What remains clear is that when it came to depicting the complexity and fragility of marriage, Chekhov neither needed nor offered consolation. This may explain why readers continue to find his portraits of marriage and family life bleak and why others find them life affirming.

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